

Youth Justice Reform Select Committee inquiry into youth justice reform in Queensland

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Submission
Rockhampton Youth Justice Public Hearing.
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Walter Reid Centre, Rockhampton.

Thank you for the opportunity to present. I was born and raised in Rockhampton. This is my home, both geographically and spiritually. I have long served my community through roles in emergency services, military and many community engagement projects. Briefly, I have investigated the biological and sociological mechanics that drive traumatic stress from one generation to the next. This has enabled me to work with local, State and National agencies and organisations such as the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Queensland Corrective Services Commission and universities. I have presented my research and implications to government and community at local, state and national levels. I have also travelled overseas to speak internationally at conferences.

One primary source and cause of trauma that is frequently more invasive than a direct, intense experience is the pervasive effect of neglect. The criminal behaviours of most youth in Rockhampton is a direct effect of neglect – systemic neglect. Crime is both a product of a broken “justice” system, and a symptom of a broken community. One fundamental contributing factor to instigate neglect and reinforce mistrust in the government is the removal of essential government funded services that address and correct this neglect.

It was raised numerous times throughout the day, that a travesty and crisis was imposed on the Rockhampton community through the insidious removal of a vital service to youth that appears to boil down to merely a personality clash. The CQ Youth Health Community project was pivotal for many agencies, organisations, individuals and their families in this community. It provided immeasurable benefits to our community over the ten years it operated. With its untimely and unwarranted cessation, our youth have no education or co-ordinated supports to access. The remaining agencies and organisations are ill-equipped and lack the specific knowledge, skills, relationships and abilities to account for this loss. They battle and bicker among themselves for funding and prominence like seagulls over a chip – and this further harms our community and its families. This loss has created a crisis and elevated stress in our community, and our youth. We need it back – with additional funding and fewer restrictions so it can be faithful to the expressed needs of the community, not to a capital-city, culturally inert and irrelevant dictated agenda. The Rockhampton community is highly resilient. We can respond optimally effectively if empowered to do so. The removal (without cause or notice) of this seminal, critical service in our community has hit hard. This reinforces mistrust in many government representatives and funding models.

While I was an audience participant it became rapidly evident from hearing the various testimonials and accounts that an imperative element of any proposed response is being overlooked. This element identifies and illuminates critical fundamental motivators to the problematic behaviours in our youth that we were discussing. A primary motive of acts of aggression, violence and hostility is fear – a perceived or real threat. This threat will originate from a point far deeper than the act of aggression itself. The fear of homelessness and hunger might drive a young person to commit an offence so they are incarcerated, even briefly, so they get a meal and secure shelter. It can even explain re-offending. The more significant the offence, the longer they will have their basic needs met by the prison system. This is particularly so for young people from homes impacted by domestic and family violence (intergenerational) and psychological trauma. Fear is the fundamental factor that drives all behaviours – fear of isolation and neglect leads to death by exposure (from when we're all babies). Fear of financial insecurity (job loss, injury) leads to fear of homelessness and loss

of belonging = isolation and death – even sexual activity is spurred by a fear of isolation. These are fundamental psychosocial drivers for this behaviour. All other behaviours are to minimise or limit the detrimental impacts of the cause of the fear. A child who grows up without fears is far less likely to engage in criminal, antisocial activities. Further fears may originate from the loss of social status, or ill-health, rejection or isolation, or perceived lack of control of events in our environment (The true root cause of PTSD). Therefore all responses must be inclusive and considerate of the impacts of threat perception on behavioural responses.

This further illuminates the role of genetics (or more accurately, epigenetics) in the cause and formulation of an optimal response. As was identified in the forum, and supported by empirical research, these challenging behaviours and anti-social attitudes often run in families. There can be very strong genetic motivators to this criminal behaviour that is rooted in our evolution. While we may not be living in caves fighting off enormous wombats or sabre-toothed thylacine, the bioevolutionary response to perceived threat remains the same. The threats now occur as homelessness, hunger, isolation, exposure, injury and disease.

Furthermore, and most immediate, is the evidence that suggests similar neural pathways in the young developing human brain that is both activated by, and responds to perceived threat, also are implicated in thrill-seeking. Testosterone is intricately implicated. Increases in testosterone can be direct consequences of increases in fear and threat perception, and thus causes of increased antisocial behaviour. This research stems from empirical research conducted on people with PTSD and their children. Thus we can conclude there are intergenerational social and genetic factors motivating this problematic behaviour. This may also serve to explain why more males tend to engage in risky criminalised behaviours than females. Again, this is vital information for the development of meaningful policies, programs and responses to this growing epidemic.

The human brain evolves rapidly to changes in its environment. That's how we adapt and survive. However, far more rapid, significant changes in our environments have occurred in the last 30yrs than in the last 100yrs that directly impact the evolving mind under construction. The most obvious of this is the impact of social media video clips. Young people have shorter attention-spans, require more stimulation and feedback. However, there is a fine line in that feedback between judgement (including criticism) and praise. Due to evolutionary processes (again, based on the role of fear to keep us safe and survive), most people are primed to critically examine and identify fault rather than identify and illuminate the benefits and positives. Young people are highly exposed and thus vulnerable to this. All responses must include these factors.

In order to develop compassion, one must first experience shame, and learn from that. Currently our "justice" system favours the offender and further victimises and traumatises the victims targeted. (Consider the plight of the Whistleblower). This is a form of oppression – pure and simple. Police have been disempowered to administer socially and culturally (and community) relevant and meaningful justice. Youth are released over and over to reoffend, over and over. Cultural elders have also been rendered virtually powerless to apply culturally and socially relevant responses to anti-social activities, such as shaming those offenders. As there is no shame, there is no consequence. As there is no consequence, there is no compassion. As there is no compassion, there is no learning. Indeed youth are now celebrating the harm, hurt and damage they are doing to their community, family and even their futures. Again, any responses need to include these considerations.

A significant part of the escalation of this issue is the soft-approach of psychological perspectives that avoid the impact of natural consequence for poor and inappropriate choices in behaviour. The demonising of discipline and removal of parental powers have effectively disabled several

generations in that they may never learn and appreciate the value of shame. I was raised by an Australian Vietnam Veteran with PTSD from serving his Country. I have also served. Studies suggest that I should be a psychological train-wreck who (statistically speaking) should have suicided about two decades ago. However, I was once shamed and humiliated by my parents as a young child and this saved me. I am grateful for their courage. I was trained by my parents to consider the impact of my behaviour on others and put myself in their shoes and explore how that would feel to me. (The following could be hypothetical, or not. You decide). I once threw raw eggs on a house of a kid at school. I was one of many. I was a bully. When my father and mother found out I was then marched around to that kid's house, made to apologise to the kid and – most importantly – his parents. I then had to clean it up to a standard that satisfied both my father and the kids' parents. At the time I didn't appreciate how embarrassing it was for my parents. But the shame taught me a lesson. A valuable and vital lesson. This was my turning point. Today I have nothing to do with the other egg-chucking bullies and believe a couple have criminal records. Perhaps their parents didn't teach them the value of shame. Perhaps their parents were too afraid to administer discipline or had the ability removed by the legal system. This scenario (whether hypothetical or not) illustrates a common barrier for parents in this, and many communities throughout Australia. Parents are systematically disempowered and binded by archaic, inappropriate and out-of-touch legislation that renders them helpless to actually RAISE their children. Parents are frustrated. Parents are angry. Parents are scared.

Today, our mental health "experts" will term this as child abuse and humiliation and state it damages a child's self-esteem. As a mental health specialist myself, I can agree, but if it occurs in excess. Parents are utterly disempowered from even the mildest forms. Courts follow though and make this unlawful – at any level. One size fits all approach is an inappropriate response. This is where the root cause of the problem is, and why we cannot teach our kids to self-regulate, be responsible and accountable. We – the community – are disempowered by irrelevant and inappropriate red tape dictated by authorities with little or no lived experience of either the good, or not-as-good learning opportunity outcomes of community empowerment. And this impacts on the trauma we already are forced to suffer – and this has become a multigenerational issue. The community is now traumatised. The tables have flipped. We need mental health practices that encourage the value of hard lessons – those that embed the value of shame, humility and gratitude and appreciation into the developing mind.

This red tape effectively eliminates the need for youth to learn through their elders, parents and other (so called) role models. They learn more about acceptance and acceptable behaviour through their peers. Thus there exists an indoctrinated – perhaps purposeful agenda-driven – lack of respect. We, the Rockhampton community, have been collectively and pervasively disempowered – perhaps through design and intention – from raising our youth to be productive social contributors.

If this agenda is to systematically enable an escalation of violence, hostility and aggression from our young people onto others, where will it end? What is the intention of disabling and disempowering parents into learned helplessness where we have no authority but all responsibility for youth outcomes? What is the purpose of embedding intergenerational traumatic stress (and its myriad of emotional, mental, social and physical health consequences) into communities?

Rockhampton has an established history of being overlooked and neglected by decades of government policy and funding. We have learned to adapt to this and do the best we can with what little we have. When a State-wide and national epidemic of crime and injustice hits us, our youth are effectively damaging their future. This, and consecutive governments, must look at the youth of today and ponder if they want them running their aged care facility or superannuation funds, or

corporations or defence systems. These kids are both a product and symptom of a broken system and community. Enable the community to fix itself and reduce fear and you'll witness a measurable reduction in antisocial behaviours. As a Dad of two very young ones, I am worried about their futures that out-of-touch government officials are forging without their consent.

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